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AUTHOR Malorzo, Lisa; Page, David
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ABSTRACT

If interpersonal spacing is a component of sex-role development, then gender identity development may partly mediate age and sex differences in personal space, as well as variations in distances due to the sex of the stimulus person. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate this possibility. Personal space preferences of 36 male and female children, 3, 5, 7 years of age, were tested using the felt-board technique. In addition, the gender identity development of each child was measured through verbal responses to 12 items drawn from questionnaires concerning the development of gender stability and gender constancy. Findings indicated that girls were more likely than boys to vary their distances depending on the sex of the target and that 3- and 7-year-olds showed closer distances in relation to same sex others while 5-year-olds prefer closer distances to opposite sex others. Children with more complete gender knowledge preferred closer distances to same-sex others. In addition, level of gender identity development was significantly related to sex of subject, with girls showing greater understanding than boys. Implications of the findings are discussed. (RH)

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Gender Identity and the Development of Personal Space in Young Children

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Lisa Malorzo and David Page
Nazareth College

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Several studies have investigated the personal space preferences of children. These investigations document both age-related and sex differences in personal distance; as well, the literature reveals that interpersonal spacing is influenced by the sex of the stimulus person and the perceived affective relationship with that individual.

With regard to age differences, it seems that seven and eight year-old children employ greater distances than young adolescents (Meisels & Guardo, 1969; Guardo & Meisels, 1971). In the case of younger children, however, the developmental sequence appears to be reversed. With the exception of a study by Sarafino and Helmuth (1981), findings reveal that between three and seven years interpersonal distance increases with age (Bass & Weinstein, 1971; Lomranz, Shapira, Choresh, & Gilat, 1975).

The data concerning sex differences in personal space among children are less clear. For example Lomranz et al. (1975) found no sex differences among young school age children, Sarafino and Helmuth (1981) indicated female pre-schoolers kept smaller distances than males as a function of time spent in day care, and Meisels and Guardo's (1969) data indicate sex differences in space depend on the affective relationship with the other person; school-age girls respond more to the emotional tone of the interaction and boys react more to the gender of the stimulus figure.

The gender of the other individual also appears to be a determinant of interpersonal distance in young children. In this regard the findings are somewhat consistent: younger children (5-7) place themselves closer to same sex peers and older children

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(pre-adolescents) place themselves closer to opposite sex peers (Meisels & Guardo, 1969; Bass & Weinstein, 1971). However, Sarafino and Helmuth (1981) report the sex of the other child had no significant impact on pre-schoolers; also, Lomranz et al. (1975) found both boys and girls would keep less distance from girls than boys.

The primary concern of this investigation is how variations in personal space among children are explained. In this regard, prior investigators seem to be in agreement: developments in personal space are a function of social learning experiences. However, there are differences among the studies as to how the nature of the relevant learning is conceptualized. For example, some emphasize the acquisition of personal space schemata as a function of normative influences while others consider reinforcements from peers and teachers or modeling influences to be important factors. The present study does not question the importance of these learning experiences, however it appears that previous studies have not considered a potentially relevant factor in regard to the personal space of children: their level of gender identity development.

Several studies document a developmental progression in children's knowledge of their gender (Emmerich, Goldman, Kirsh, & Sharabany, 1977; Marcus & Overton, 1978; McConaghy, 1979). These age-related increases in gender identity are also related to underlying changes in children's cognitive skills: a finding that supports, in part, a cognitive-developmental analysis of sex role development originally outlined by Kohlberg and his associates (Kohlberg, 1966; Kohlberg & Zigler, 1967). Of crucial importance

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to this study is the frequent finding that increases in gender identity are related to children's knowledge of sex-role stereotypes (Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978) and to a correspondence between their actual behavior and their understanding of sex-role appropriate behaviors (Emmerich et al., 1977; Ruble, Balaban, & Cooper, 1981; Slaby & Frey, 1975; Weinraub, Clemens, Sockloff, Ethridge, Gracely, & Myers, 1984). More specifically, it has been shown that developments in gender identity are related to imitation of same sex models and sex-typed toy preferences. Insofar as interpersonal spacing may be a component of sex-role development, it would seem that age and sex differences in personal space as well as variations in distances due to the sex of the stimulus person would be mediated, in part, by developments in gender identity. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate this possibility.

The personal space preferences of male and female children ranging between three and seven years old were tested using the felt-board technique (Keuthe, 1962; Hasse & Markey, 1973). The subjects indicated their preferred interpersonal distances in relation to a same and opposite sex stimulus figure who was described as being a peer or four years older than the subject. In addition, the gender identity development of each child was measured. Prior research and our analysis of the probable relationship between personal space and gender identity development suggested the following primary predictions: 1) interpersonal spacing should vary significantly depending on the sex and age of the child as well as the sex of the stimulus

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figure; 2) level of gender identity development should be related to interpersonal distance.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-six children participated in the study. There were six females and six males representing each of three age groups: three years, five years, and seven years. The children were selected from day-care centers; parental permission was obtained for all subjects.

Procedure

First, the gender identity of each child was measured through their verbal responses to twelve items drawn from questionnaires concerning the development of gender stability and gender constancy (Emmerich, Goldman, Kirsh, & Sharabany, 1977; Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978). The subject was then given a felt doll and told "Let's pretend this doll is you". Each child was given a verbal description of the background scene depicted on the felt board and given the following instructions: "Let's pretend that you spent a day at a playground just like this one and you became very tired so you decided to sit down on the closest park bench. On the bench you see a girl/boy who is the same age/ four years older than you, and whom you do not know. Could you show me where you would sit on the park bench?" Personal space was then measured in the number of inches between the torsos of the two felt figures. The presentation order of the stimulus combinations (same sex-same age; same sex-older; opposite sex-same age; opposite sex; older) was randomized across subjects.

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Results

The data were submitted to a four-way analysis of variance with two between subjects variables (age -three, five, seven; sex -male, female) and two within-subjects variables (sex of other -same, opposite; age of other -same, four years older). Interpersonal distance served as the dependent variable.

The analysis revealed no significant main effects. However, significant interactions between sex of subject and sex of stranger, $F(1, 30) = 5.11$, $p = .029$, and between age of subject and sex of stranger, $F(2,30) = 6.52$, $p = .004$, were obtained. The first interaction revealed girls were more likely than boys to vary their distances depending on the sex of the target; the female subjects showed a clear preference for being close to same sex others. The second interaction indicates that three and seven year-olds show closer distances in relation to same sex others while five year-olds prefer closer distances to opposite sex others. Figures 1 and 2 depict these interactions.

The most relevant issue for this study is the relationship between level of gender identity development and size of personal space zone. This relationship was assessed with a multiple regression analysis. In order to assess the relative importance of gender identity development in predicting interpersonal spacing, age of subjects (in years and months) as well as sex of subjects were included as predictors in the equation. Two separate analyses were done; in one, distance from the same sex target served as the criterion; in the other, distance from the opposite sex target was the criterion. Preferred distance from the same sex target was significantly related to these factors, $F(3,32) = 3.74$, $p = .02$.

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Partial correlations revealed that level of gender identity development was the best predictor of personal space in relation to the same sex target and that this effect was independent of the age and sex of the subjects: $F = 6.09$, $p = .018$. Those children with more complete gender knowledge preferred closer distances to same-sex others. Taken together or separately, age and sex of subject as well as level of gender identity development did not predict distance from the opposite sex other. In addition, simple correlations revealed that level of gender identity development was significantly related to sex of subject with girls showing greater understanding than boys: $r = .381$ $p < .05$.

Discussion

Prior investigators suggested developments in interpersonal spacing among young children were a function of social learning experiences involving either the acquisition of personal space schemata, modeling, or selective reinforcement from peers and teachers. Our data suggest a qualitatively different force impacting on interpersonal spacing which may accompany social learning: children's understanding of their gender.

The finding that children with relatively mature gender identities preferred closer distances to same sex others than their less mature peers can be understood within the framework of Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental analysis of gender identity development (Kohlberg, 1966; Kohlberg & Ziegler, 1967). Kohlberg and his associates argue that a "gender valuing" process accompanies the stabilization of gender identity which serves to make children highly same-sex oriented in their sex role

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preference. Studies that show children with mature identities possess clearer sex-role stereotypes, demonstrate sex-typed toy preferences, and selectively attend to same-sex models support this analysis. Our results suggest interpersonal spacing in reference to same sex others may also be mediated by affective concerns accompanying gender understanding. In addition to social learning experiences, interpersonal spacing may be a function of the child's own contribution in terms of the organizing capacities of gender identity on sex role behaviors.

Our analysis can be tentatively applied to the significant interaction between sex of subject and sex of target. This particular result revealed our young female participants showed a clearer preference for being close to same sex others than their male peers. A similar finding by Lomranz and his colleagues (1975) revealed that personal spacing by both boys and girls was shorter in reference to other girls than other boys. Their explanation invoked modeling forces and the fact that in our culture mothers are the central figures with whom children come in contact thus making females less threatening. Our finding may reflect similar processes, however we would like to suggest gender identity may also be a factor. Our female participants demonstrated significantly higher levels of gender understanding than our boys; the clearer preference for being close to same sex others by our girls than by our boys may be indicative of a stronger accompanying gender valuing process.

The significant interaction between age and approach to same or opposite sex others partially replicates prior findings of Bass and Weinstein (1971) and Lomranz et al (1975). Our three and seven

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year olds preferred closer distances to same sex others while our five year olds preferred closer distances to opposite sex others. This trend in spacing seems consistent with Mussen, Conger, and Kagan's (1969) work on patterns of friendship formation. They observed that friendships occurring during the preschool years take place between individuals of the same sex and at age 5 mixed-sex play groups emerge. At age seven, however, children return to same-sex groups. Moreno's (1953) sociometric analysis of peer interaction revealing mixed sex choices in first graders is also consistent with this pattern. Our finding that seven year olds demonstrated the clearest preference for being close to same sex others replicates the trend obtained by Meisels and Guardo (1969). Their subsequent analysis of this developmental pattern invoked the impact of socially inculcated schemata in relation to sex-role identification (Guardo & Meisels, 1971). We would like to be able to suggest that the present finding supports our contention that gender valuing contributes to interpersonal spacing since one would expect our older participants to possess nearly complete gender knowledge. However the seven year olds did not demonstrate full gender understanding and in fact were not significantly more knowledgeable in this regard than our younger participants; consequently this aspect of our analysis remains tentative. Finally, the absence of a main effect of age of the target child suggests that our participants do not discriminate between peers and children four years older in establishing interpersonal distance.

We are currently attempting to replicate our finding of a relationship between gender knowledge and interpersonal spacing

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with other five and seven year olds; in addition we are extending our investigation to nine year olds in hopes of obtaining information concerning the impact of fully mature gender identities on interpersonal spacing. In future studies we intend to examine this issue in regards to spacing between children of various degrees of acquaintanceship and in relation to variations in settings.

In conclusion, we offer yet another factor which bears in developments in interpersonal spacing in young children: their level of gender identity development. In addition to external forces such as sex of the target child and degree of acquaintanceship, interpersonal spacing may be a function of an internal gender valuing process. Moreover, this present finding may serve to clarify the age-related developments in spacing found in prior studies.

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FIGURE 1

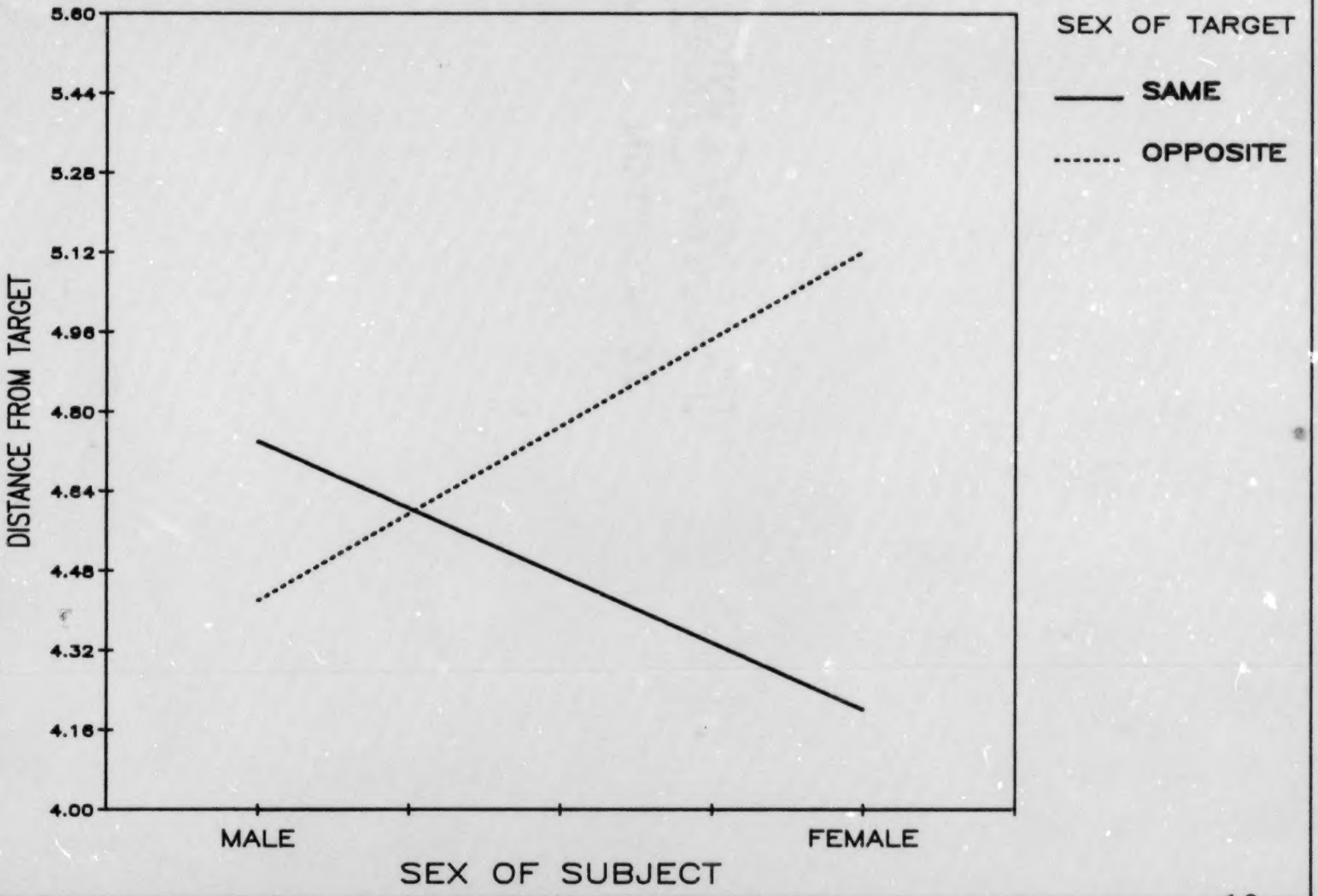
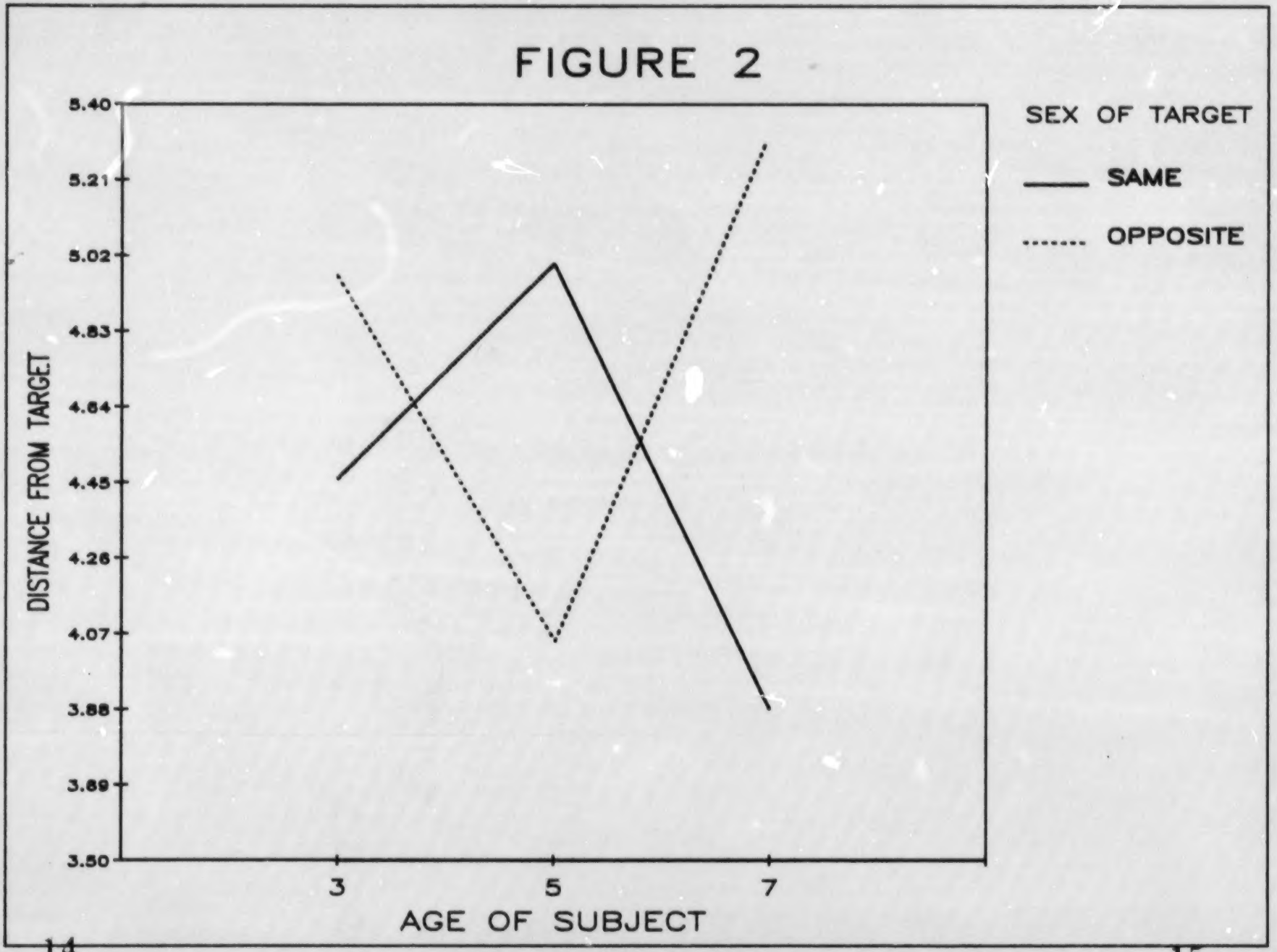

5.60
5.44
5.28
5.12
4.96
4.80
4.64
4.48
4.32
4.16
4.00
DISTANCE FROM TARGET
MALE
FEMALE
SEX OF SUBJECT
SEX OF TARGET
SAME
OPPOSITE

FIGURE 2


5.40
5.21
5.02
4.83
4.64
4.45
4.26
4.07
3.88
3.69
3.50
DISTANCE FROM TARGET
3
5
7
AGE OF SUBJECT
SEX OF TARGET
SAME
OPPOSITE

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